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ABSTRACT

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THE FIRST YEAR OF EXPERIENCE: INFLUENCES ON BEGINNING TEACHERS

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THE FIRST YEAR OF EXPERIENCE: INFLUENCES ON BEGINNING TEACHERS

By necessity, the beginning teacher makes a quick transition from the role of university student to the role of teacher. What influences do experienced teachers have during the transitional period, and how does such influence take place? These questions were the focus of a study of first year teachers in elementary schools in a suburban Toronto school district.[1]

The data indicated that experienced teachers played a significant role in the socialization of these beginning teachers, particularly in terms of the development of beginning teacher expectations for student achievement. The experienced teacher definition of normal student achievement was readily adopted and even sought out by the beginning teacher. However, it was also very clear that there was an enormous barrier between the experienced teachers and the beginners, when it came to giving or asking for help with the development of teaching techniques.

This barrier resulted in beginning teachers' learning about the teaching techniques of their more experienced colleagues only in very indirect and convoluted ways. Despite this generalized barrier, some interesting exceptions indicated there were certain circumstances under which very close professional relationships could be established between beginning and experienced teacher.

Methodology

The data were collected in two stages. The first stage involved open-ended discussions with seventeen people, including beginning and experienced teachers and principals

from elementary schools in Ontario. Some patterns quickly became apparent. Discipline, for example, was repeatedly mentioned as a serious problem for beginning teachers. A concern about keeping certain difficulties hidden from other staff members was also raised frequently. As such patterns emerged, they were noted and used as probe points in succeeding interviews.

As the interviews proceeded, specific questions were asked to establish whether the experience of the person currently being interviewed was congruent with generalizations formulated to that point. Generalizations were revised accordingly. For example, at first it seemed experienced teachers were extremely reluctant to assist beginning teachers in any way. When this suggestion was specifically pursued, it became apparent that certain experienced teachers were heavily involved in working with the beginners, while others had almost no contact with them at all.

Tentative generalizations developed in this first stage were modified and refined in the participant observation which followed with twenty-three beginning teachers in elementary schools in a large school district in suburban Toronto. Housing in the area ranged from low rent to luxury high rise apartments, and from small houses to those that might more appropriately be called estates. The researcher visited twenty-three beginning teachers for a total of thirty-eight school days during the spring of 1975. From one to five school days were spent with each teacher, with the length of time spent with individuals decreasing as the study progressed.

The twenty-three teachers included nineteen women and four men. Twenty-one of them were in their early 20's, and two were in their late 20's. Thirteen were married and ten were single. Eighteen were teaching in regular classrooms, and five were teaching in open or semi-open plan schools. Fifteen were teaching at the primary

level (kindergarten to grade 3) and eight were teaching at the junior level (grades 4 to 6). All schools visited were fairly large ones, the smallest having nine teachers on staff.

The initial contacts with each school were made through the principals, some of whom required that the beginning teacher consent to the visit over the phone. In all cases, the principal or the beginning teacher was advised that the researcher was willing to act as a teacher aide during the visit. In fact, the role played by the researcher in the different classrooms varied. Some teachers had planned activities requiring the assistance of another adult in the classroom. Some asked the researcher to walk around, observe, talk to the children, and get involved in an informal way. Others asked the researcher to work with specified individual children. Still others preferred to carry on in their usual way, allowing the researcher simply to observe.

In general, the method used was to stay with the beginning teacher during the entire day. The period of time before school started in the morning was spent chatting with the beginning teacher in her classroom or in the staffroom. The first hour or so after the children arrived was spent in getting oriented to the beginning teacher's style of teaching. This period of time provided the basis for the beginning of direct questioning regarding teaching approaches observed. This interchange began at the earliest possible opportunity, which might have been while walking down the hall with the teacher and class to the gymnasium, during yard duty, while having coffee at recess, or when the beginning teacher took the opportunity during class to begin a conversation with the researcher.

Many remarks were made in informal situations where it was not possible to take notes immediately. Lunchtime generally was a time for gathering rich data,

both through having conversation with the beginning teacher and through observing her interactions with other staff members. The teaching period immediately after lunch was used to compile notes on what had been observed and discussed over the noon hour.

As the data collection proceeded, a set of questions was developed to test working hypotheses. These questions covered all the topics on which information was to be sought before leaving the school. An attempt was made, however, to avoid direct posing of the questions, partly because experience early in the data collection suggested that answers to direct questions would lack depth, and partly because volunteered data were seen as having more validity.

Setting Standards for Students

When beginning teachers start teaching, they are confronted with students of differing ability and differing levels of achievement. Even if their university directed practice teaching experience was with children of approximately the same age, it did not take place during the first week of the fall term and it may not have taken place in a neighbourhood similar in socio-economic level. The teachers are immediately faced with the problem of what they are to consider reasonable achievement from their students. The beginning teachers in this study depended on experienced teachers to set these standards. They did this in many ways, including direct consultation, observing displayed student work, and casual discussion in the staffroom.

Generally, the beginning teachers hesitated to seek help unless they felt safe that their competence would not be questioned. Defining normal student achievement, however, was not one of those sensitive problems which the beginning teachers kept to themselves. They did not

seem to feel they ought to know what to expect from their students. Therefore, they felt free to consult with experienced teachers on the matter.

And consult they did. Many staffroom discussions were observed in which beginning teachers were seeking guidance about standards in their classrooms. Teachers brought samples of their students' work to discuss. They inquired about how much difficulty they could expect their students to encounter with certain new concepts.

They discussed standardized test results, but only to compare their students' results with those of other teachers at the same grade level. Even in a situation involving standardized tests, where external standards were available for comparison, teacher expectations of students were defined in terms of the achievement levels of other students at the same grade level in the school.

One beginning teacher was very concerned about the progress her grade one children were making in writing stories. She saw that other grade one children were writing three or four sentence stories, while still others were writing full page stories. She was worrying about whether or not her children would be able to read the one sentence stories they had struggled through the previous day. She seemed very sensitive about her children's progress in this regard.

Several of the beginning teachers said they had initiated meetings with the teacher of the next higher grade to find out the kinds of work the children would be expected to do, and the standard at which they would be expected to perform. A grade one teacher, whose emphasis had been largely on phonics, was teaching her class a basic sight word list for only one reason - the grade two teacher expected the children to know those words. Another grade one teacher found out from a grade two teacher that the children would be expected to write stories of at least

five sentences and then set this requirement for her own students. After making similar inquiries about the expectation in the arithmetic program, she concluded that it was necessary "to step it up a bit." She clearly stated that she altered her standards in order to meet the requirement of the next teacher's program.

In summary, these frequent consultations with experienced teachers were on the following topics: the level of achievement of the beginning teacher's students, what skills students ought to have mastered by certain times of the year, whether certain standards of work fell within the "normal" range, and what kind and level of difficulty of work would be required by teachers at the next grade level. This dependence on experienced teachers for the determination of standards was clearcut. In particular, other teachers working at the same grade level as the beginning teacher, or teachers who would receive the beginning teacher's students the next year, were influential. Even the researcher, as a former primary teacher, was consulted by beginning primary teachers on what level of student achievement should be expected.

The Uninvolved Experienced Teacher

With certain exceptions, experienced teachers hesitated or refused to get involved in working with beginning teachers. They were careful to make it clear they had no wish to interfere. Some indicated they did not wish to be involved at all in the beginning teachers' working through of approaches and problems.

In one school, a beginning teacher felt the experienced teachers were particularly unhelpful and uncooperative. She said that teaching methods were never discussed, that she did not know what the other teachers were doing, and that she was quite sure they did not care what she was

doing. While this teacher's situation was an extreme one, other beginning teachers also reported that experienced teachers remained detached from them.

For example, a beginning teacher working in an open area with five experienced teachers said she did not know what the others were doing since she had never been "invited in to see." This seemed remarkable since all six teachers were visible to each other even over the walls they had ingeniously devised to mark off their own spaces and it hardly seemed necessary to be "invited in to see." When it was suggested to the beginning teacher that she must know what other teachers were doing since she could see them, she continued to deny any knowledge, explaining that although she could see the teacher next to her handing out books on which the children worked all morning, she did not know what they were doing. In fact, she said she did not even know if that teacher was using reading groups. She said that if she went to borrow a pot of glue, she felt like an intruder.

These findings parallel the literature which suggests that beginning teachers do not find it easy to get information on the teaching practices of experienced teachers. For example, Corman[2] described the reaction of experienced teachers to her questions:

> The apparent hostility and isolationism of teachers was totally incomprehensible and disturbing to me. Asking a colleague about his classroom activities was usually interpreted as something very suspicious and was either rudely rebuffed or glibly avoided. All in all, I felt very much alone and professionally insecure.

In explanation, an experienced teacher said she deliberately stayed away from first year teachers, especially if they seemed to be having problems. She would not even go into their classrooms to ask how things were going.

She said she had heard too many young teachers saying that they didn't want "old women meddling in what they are trying to do."

The Fear of Being Thought Incompetent

The other side of the barrier between beginning and experienced teachers was the beginning teachers' fear of being thought incompetent.

Organizational arrangements make it clear to beginning teachers that they are expected to become integrated rapidly into the school. There is no differentiation in task allocation between beginning and experienced teachers. There are seldom formal arrangements made to provide beginning teachers with special assistance. Their teacher training is considered to be complete, and contact with the teacher training institution is discontinued. These circumstances combine to make it clear that beginning teachers are expected to cope with the same circumstances as experienced teachers. This expectation may lead beginning teachers to feel that any requests for assistance will be interpreted as signs of incompetence. The data support this interpretation.

For example, one beginning teacher told the researcher that when he started teaching in the fall he was not sure what he was supposed to teach. He did not want to look foolish by asking so he waited to be told. Since he was not told he assumed he was supposed to know. Consequently, it was not until the first professional development day that he obtained the subject curriculum guides.

Another beginning teacher explained that he had not asked for help even when he knew he needed it because he had worried about making himself "vulnerable."

Another beginning teacher was asked about the kinds of problems she preferred to keep to herself. She replied that she felt very sensitive about her reading

groups. She believed the ideal program was an individualized one, and felt guilty about dividing her class into groups. She said she did not like to talk about the seatwork her students were doing and she certainly would not discuss the stencils she was using with anyone. She explained this was because she disapproved of using stencils at all. She said she did not want to discuss these aspects of her program in which she felt she was doing an inadequate job.

Another beginning teacher said she preferred to work out anything relating to teaching methodology on her own. She gave as an example the fact that she had not asked for assistance with the difficult task of organizing her reading program. She said she felt this sort of thing was her own responsibility, and as a competent teacher she ought not to need help with such matters.

If there was any area of teaching performance about which the beginning teachers were particularly sensitive, it was the extent to which their students' behaviour appeared to be under control. Several researchers have suggested that controlling of student behaviour is not only a difficult problem, but also is one which absolutely must be solved if the beginning teacher is to be judged as competent by administrators, experienced teachers, parents, and students.

Gordon[3] concluded that within a high school "disorder was taken as a visible sign of incompetence by colleagues, principal, parents, and students." Eddy[4] said that administrators and other teachers carefully watch beginning teachers to see whether they will be able to get control. Willower[5] concluded that those beginning teachers who fail to measure up in controlling student behaviour are "apt to become marginal in the teacher group and in teaching itself."

This stress on the importance of controlling students is also reflected in the data from this study. A beginning teacher who resigned under severe emotional stress explained that the chaos in her classroom led to her having a lack of credibility as a teacher, both with other teachers and also with students. Even while under stress, she tried to disguise the extent of her control problems from other teachers.

Pride was suggested by another beginner as a reason for keeping discipline problems to herself. She felt she could blame only herself for such problems, saying, "It's my fault, I'm slipping."

If the beginning teachers did ask for help with discipline problems, it was not generally until the problem reached crisis proportions. One child made life miserable for a beginning teacher for four months. When the child's mother asked for an interview, seeking guidance from the teacher on coping with the child at home, the beginning teacher decided the child was severely emotionally disturbed and possibly dangerous to other children. At that point she felt she had sufficient ground for saying, "If I have to have this kid in my room, I need help." Until the interview with the mother, the teacher had felt that if she was unable to cope with the child's behaviour on her own, it was a reflection on her own competency.

Another teacher described an incident in which a child had thrown a temper tantrum, ripping up papers and striking other children. The teacher had run down the hall and asked another teacher to come and calm the child down. The experienced teacher helped in this crisis situation, but that was the only time the beginning teacher ever sought help in working with this perpetual problem child, as she felt she should be able to handle the problem herself.

Since the beginning teachers seemed unwilling to talk over the difficulties they had which might reflect on their competence, their asking for assistance appeared limited to "safe" minor problems. They asked experienced teachers for suggestions for physical education or phonics games. They asked advice on textbooks. They asked how to organize field trips. They asked specific questions about specific problems that could be answered easily and quickly. In other words, organizational arrangements and the beginning teachers' own attitudes combined to create the myth of the instantaneously competent teacher who needs minimal help in developing an effective teaching program.

Learning without Asking

Despite the lack of focused discussion between beginning and experienced teachers on teaching practices, the beginners were discovering a great deal about what was happening in the classrooms of their colleagues.

When they were asked how they thought their programs compared to those of other teachers, invariably the beginning teachers said they did not know. They claimed they never had opportunities to see experienced teachers in action, and that the experienced teachers seldom talked about what they were doing in their classrooms anyway. Nevertheless, the beginning teachers in this study were acquiring information about the practices and beliefs of experienced teachers. The information appeared to be gathered mostly in an indirect fashion.

For example, in one beginning teacher's classroom, the researcher commented on the relatively heavy emphasis being given to skills development. The beginning teacher reacted with astonishment that teachers in other schools might use different procedures, and remarked that the other teachers in her school were also skills-oriented.

When asked how she knew this, she said that her students' report cards from previous years made extensive references to skills, she saw teachers running off dittoes that clearly were skills-oriented, and parents had mentioned the use of speed tests by previous teachers.

The staffroom was a source of much information. Beginning teachers learned quickly about testing procedures around report card time when experienced teachers started talking about the way they were evaluating their students' progress. This kind of sudden awareness was also described by Cornog:[6]

> I recall noting with some embarassment the sparseness of little red marks in my grade book in comparison with the handsome display of the same in the grade books of other teachers.

Beginning teachers also said they could get a good idea of the kinds of programs other teachers had through comments overheard, like"I'm doing speed tests with the kids and they still don't know their facts," or "We took the whole afternoon off to do such and such."

Teaching materials brought in by experienced teachers also contributed to the beginning teacher's familiarity with other programs in the school. While visiting schools, the researcher observed teachers marking students' work, making stencils, and preparing instructional aids in the staffroom. One beginning teacher suggested that one can tell a great deal about a teacher's program by whether she made stencils or made "activities." Also, when other teachers were correcting their students' work, beginning teachers were able to see something about the kind of work the students were doing.

Another place where the beginning teachers were learning about other teachers' programs was the duplicating room. About half an hour before school started in the morning these rooms were very busy, with several teachers using the machines. The researcher accompanied a beginning

teacher in one of these peak periods. The room was crowded with teachers and copies of dittoes were placed on work areas all around the room. The beginning teacher glanced at several of the teachers' dittoes, and returned to her classroom with some ideas.

Teachers also suggested that walking by open classroom doors while school was in progress told them a lot about other programs. These opportunities arose when beginning teachers' classes were going to the gymnasium or to the library. Or, the beginning teachers looked into classrooms when school was over for the day and the other teachers had left. One beginning teacher volunteered the information that indoor hall duty at recess on rainy days provided her with opportunities to go into other teachers' classrooms. She said that she was able to watch what the children were doing in the classrooms and had picked up many ideas that way.

Whether they only glanced in open doors or they actually entered classrooms and looked carefully, the beginning teachers were using the physical appearance of classrooms as information regarding programs. For example, when the teacher in the room next to a beginning teacher resigned during the year, the beginning teacher judged that the new teacher was more structured than the former one because she took away tables that had been used for modelling and other creative activities by the previous teacher and substituted for them "readiness" activities.

Chalkboards filled with assignments also were sources of information regarding what other teachers were doing. Displays in the halls provided more information. A beginning teacher explained that if a teacher displays work that has been a group effort, she probably has a different kind of program than a teacher who displays duplicate copies of work done by individuals. The use of foolscap versus chart paper also gave her information.

Another beginning teacher said she received some very obvious clues about what other teachers in the school were doing when she went to the resource room to get textbooks and found that all those based on a skills-oriented approach had already been taken.

Behaviour of and comments by the beginning teachers' students also proved informative. One teacher said that from the first day of school her grade three students had begun running laps on entering the gymnasium and she assumed that previous teachers had required this. A grade two teacher assumed that formal printing lessons had not been part of her children's previous teachers' program because their printing was poor, but improved rapidly when she began formal lessons. Some children made comments like, "Mr. ___ always let us do that." If the previous teacher had been more permissive in the classroom, the children sometimes challenged the teacher, asking why they had to be quiet or sit in one place.

In all these ways, beginning teachers received cues about what was happening in other classrooms. Focused conversation between beginning and experienced teacher on teaching practices was minimal, and the opportunity to observe other teachers at work was non-existent. The beginning teachers' limited knowledge of other teachers' practices was based on information gained indirectly. They acquired this information informally as they watched and interacted with teachers outside actual classroom teaching situations. They heard comments in the staffroom and looked at materials brought in by experienced teachers. They also heard comments and saw materials around the duplicating machine. Looking through open classroom doors or visiting other teachers' classrooms before or after school also informed beginners about the kind of work in which other teachers were currently engaged and the materials and techniques they used.

The Lucky Few

Despite the generalized barrier to discussion of teaching practices between beginning and experienced teacher, and the resulting very convoluted way beginning teachers used to determine what was going on in their colleagues' classrooms, there did appear to be certain circumstances under which very close professional relationships could be established between beginning and experienced teachers.

In searching for a possible source of assistance among colleagues, the beginning teachers appeared to ask two questions:

1. Who teaches the same grade as I do?
2. Who teaches like I want to?

If the same name answered both questions, the beginning teacher had identified a possible source of professional support and guidance for the year. If these two questions could not be answered by the same name, the beginning teacher abandoned hope of finding a source of extended assistance from an experienced teacher on staff.

Without exception, any extended interchange that did occur between beginning and experienced teacher was between teachers teaching the same grades. Teaching at the same grade level appeared to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for the development of a close working relationship between a beginning and experienced teacher.

Six of the twenty-three beginning teachers visited had developed close relationships with experienced teachers. In each of these relationships, both teachers taught the same grade.

These six close relationships were very visible. The two sat together in the staffroom, they went out to lunch together, and they chatted while standing in the hallways waiting for the children to come in. They moved

back and forth between each other's classrooms borrowing equipment and supplies, checking information regarding school procedures, laughing over incidents, and sharing problems and ideas.

In one school, two minutes after introductions, the beginning teacher volunteered that she felt cut off from the other grade one teachers. She said this was partly because they were located in another wing of the building, and partly because the two were close friends, were team teaching, and she was afraid to intrude. This teacher had assumed that the appropriate source of assistance for her was teachers working on her own grade level, and felt it necessary to account for why she was not working with them.

In other cases, established friendships interfered with the development of close relationships between beginning and experienced teachers working at the same grade level. None of these beginning teachers developed a close relationship with a teacher at another grade level.

When the classrooms of teachers working at the same grade level as the beginning teacher were any distance from the beginning teacher's, no close working relationships developed. In one case, the beginning teacher was on a different floor and at the opposite end of the building from the only other teacher on her grade level. This beginning teacher reported that the distance between their two classrooms made it difficult for them to get to know each other very well. With this possible source of help eliminated by distance, again the beginning teacher coped on her own.

A beginning teacher who was the only grade two teacher in her school repeatedly mentioned regret at not having had someone with whom to consult. In fact, five times in one day, she raised the subject. She was trans-

ferring to a school the following year where there would be others teaching her grade, and expressed great satisfaction that there would finally be someone with whom she could discuss things. When questioned as to what other possible teacher sources of help there were in her school, she explained that she had eliminated the grade one and grade three teachers as possibilities because the difference in grade levels meant they would not have enough in common with her to be helpful.

This beginning teacher was aware that the researcher had taught grade two in the past. Several times on the first day of the visit she asked advice on classroom organizational problems. On the second day of the visit, the suggestions had been taken and alterations made. The beginning teacher seemed so anxious to talk that the research study was temporarily abandoned and the lunch hour spent discussing ways to deal with the beginning teacher's problems. It was very clear that this beginning teacher viewed as possible sources of help only teachers working at her own grade level (including the researcher) and that she regretted having been the only grade two teacher, and therefore, in her view, left with no possible sources of assistance.

In one school, both the grade one teachers were in their first year. One had run into more difficulties than she could handle and had resigned during the fall. In describing what had happened the remaining teacher commented that while the other beginning teacher's problems were coming to a peak, "...of course, I was the one she came to ask about what she should do next." Even in this case, the "same grade" criterion was the over-riding one in the search for assistance from other teachers, even though the teacher from whom help was being sought was, even in her view, too inexperienced to be able to offer it.

There were five other beginning teachers who were the only teachers in their schools working at their particular grade levels. All of them claimed to have coped on their own throughout the year. Not one had developed a close relationship with another teacher.

The second question asked by beginning teachers in their search for assistance was "Who teaches like I want to?" If no other teachers at their grade level taught like they wanted to, the beginning teachers looked no farther. For example, one teacher said she had nowhere to turn for support because the other grade one teacher "was not the sort of person to whom (she'd) go." She explained:

> To be blunt, she's lousy. She just doesn't care. She has dittoed colouring book pages and has the kids colouring them in all day. That's just busy work in my opinion.

There had also been a public disagreement between the two teachers at a professional development day over methods of teaching reading. The beginning teacher commented, "Why should I ask her for help? What's the use?" Again, this beginning teacher did <u>not</u> turn to teachers on other grade levels for assistance, and fervently stated her hope that the next teacher to be hired to teach her grade level would be someone whose approach to teaching she could respect.

In another example, a kindergarten teacher was working in a two room pod with the movable doors open, sharing ideas, problems and materials with the other kindergarten teacher. A few months later, the experienced teacher left and another kindergarten teacher arrived. Cooperation and mutual assistance between the two kindergarten teachers promptly was cut back and the movable doors shut. The beginning teacher had decided this teacher's approach was too "structured" for her. However, she was looking forward to reopening the doors in the fall, when a new, more "open" teacher was expected.

The only close relationships formed between beginning and experienced teachers occurred between teachers of the same grade level, whose classroom doors were visible to each other, and whose teaching ideologies were compatible. No beginning teachers who were the only teachers of their grade level in their schools struck up close relationships with teachers of other grade levels. In other words, beginning teachers perceived experienced teachers at their own grade level as their logical, indeed their only possible source of extended assistance from colleagues, and if their situation somehow mediated against the formation of such a relationship , they pursued help no further from other teachers.

Summary

The major findings of this study were as follows:

1. beginning teachers relied on experienced teachers to define for them appropriate standards for student achievement;
2. experienced teachers, in general, were hesitant about offering assistance to beginners for fear of appearing interfering;
3. beginning teachers asked for assistance only when they were sure their competence would not be questioned;
4. beginning teachers determined a great deal about what was happening in the classrooms of other teachers by simply watching and listening;
5. and, wherever close relationships did develop between beginning and experienced teacher, they were always between teachers of the same grade, whose classrooms were located across from or beside each other, and whose teaching ideologies were compatible.

FOOTNOTES

1. Janet C. McIntosh, "The First Year of Experience: Influences on Beginning Teachers" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1976.)

2. Linda Corman, "Hangman or Victim," in Don't Smile Until Christmas, ed. by Kevin Ryan (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 109.

3. C. Wayne Gordon, The Social System of the High School (Glencoe, Ill.: Rand McNally and Co., 1957.)

4. Elizabeth M. Eddy, Becoming a Teacher: The Passage to Professional Status (New York, N.Y.: Teachers College Press, 1969.)

5. Donald J. Willower, "The Teacher Sub-culture and Rites of Passage," Urban Education, 4 (July, 1969), 108.

6. Gary Cornog, "To Care and not to Care," in Don't Smile Until Christmas, ed. by Kevin Ryan (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 8.